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AUTHOR Raftery, Susan R.
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ABSTRACT

Alabama has serious economic and social problems, and the situation is worse in rural areas and small towns than in urban areas. The solutions to the problems of small communities must be found within the communities themselves. Sustainable communities are those that aggressively manage their destiny, based on a realistic and well planned vision. A sustainable community depends on the involvement of competent local leaders. Effective leadership development programs must take place in the community and be grounded in the knowledge of local conditions. Community leadership is also experiential and action based. Leadership training is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for improving community viability. Leadership development is a long-term process that should be integrated with community and economic development activities. Components of leadership development are technical knowledge about communities and successful development strategies; awareness, understanding, and application of leadership skills; and partnerships among community organizations and institutions. A leadership development continuum outlines elements in four developmental phases--personal, interpersonal, group or organizational, and community or systems development. (SV)

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Community Leadership Development for Sustainable Alabama Communities

Susan Raftery

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Community Resource Development
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

ALABAMA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE, AUBURN UNIVERSITY, ALABAMA 36849-5612

Community Leadership Development For Sustainable Alabama Communities

Small town and rural American communities are facing new challenges and difficult choices. The communities have lost most of their political voice at the federal level. State government is no longer able to supply all of the services once provided through federal dollars. This leaves local communities to face mounting problems. Such problems must be confronted at the local level, by local people, using local resources. This is not a job to be left to elected officials. All citizens must play their part in the future of their community.

In Alabama, the economic and social concerns that need attention are much more severe than those in many other regions in the nation. Flynt (1993) cites startling statistics about the state of Alabama:

- The U.S. population grew by 9.8 percent during the 1980s. Alabama's population grew by only 3.8 percent.
- In 1990, Alabama's per capita income was $1,500 below the southeastern U.S. average and $3,700 below the national average. Nor did it close the gap on the region during the 1980s.
- In 1989, 18.3 percent of all Alabama families lived in poverty, according to the U.S. Census. In 1991, Alabama had the nation's fifth highest poverty rate.
- Historically Alabama's unemployment rate has been higher than the national average, although this has not been the case during the past year.
- Child poverty in Alabama continues to include one-third of all children. This ranks Alabama next to last among the 50 states and the District of Columbia.
- In 1991, Alabama's poorest families paid 10 percent more of their incomes in taxes than they did in 1985. The state's richest families paid 2 percent less taxes. The poorest one-fifth of Alabamians paid 11.9 percent of their income in taxes, while the wealthiest paid 5.1 percent.
- In 1991, Alabama's population ranked forty-second in the health of its citizens in a study conducted by Northwestern National Life Insurance Company. This survey examined rates of disease, access to health care, disability, and mortality rates.

These facts can create paralysis. Or, these facts can become the motivational factor Alabamians need to begin to work toward a better future. For those who live in rural and small town Alabama, such facts have been historically worse than for their urban counterparts. It is time for these communities to mobilize action for the future of their communities. The question is, where do we begin?

The answer resides in the communities themselves and in the people who live and work in these communities. Whether they are young or old, black or white, rich or poor, the power to change Alabama communities lies in their greatest resource—the people. Whatever alternative is chosen, be it small business development or industrial recruitment, tourism or high tech, the people must lead the way. These communities need to be identifying and nurturing local leaders.

Local leaders are not only **elected** leaders. Instead, we need to look at all members of the community as potential leaders. Everyone has special talents to use in meeting the challenges that confront the community. All Alabama communities need a cadre of well-informed and trained citizens who want to make life better in their community. To carry out successful community and economic development, a community cannot depend on outside assistance. The responsibility lies within the community—through local leaders. They have the most to gain or lose from the success or failure of the community.

Sustainable Community Development

In the 1990s and beyond, the communities that survive and prosper will be those that work daily to enhance their economic and community

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viability. No one can do this for a community. Such interest must be started locally and driven by local leaders.

Dykeman (1991) defines sustainable communities as those that aggressively manage and control their destiny. This destiny is based on a realistic and well-thought-through vision. Successful communities are those that have closely studied their institutions and agencies and discovered how these same entities make up the "system" that makes the community unique. This understanding will direct change and assist in determining appropriate courses of action consistent with the beliefs and values of the community. Such an integrated approach is comprehensive; it addresses social, economic, physical, and environmental concerns. Throughout this study phase citizens must take care not to lose sight of the central concern for the present and future welfare of individuals and the community. To Dykeman, such a process builds communities that are economically viable, socially vital, and environmentally sound.

A community, in working toward the goal of being a sustainable community, will need individuals or groups to become involved. These individuals and groups will undertake and carry out action in the community. The ability of these individuals or groups to meet these needs will depend, in part, upon whether there are available competent and capable local leaders to become involved. Leadership development and community leadership programs are keys to training local citizens for expanded leadership roles. Effective leadership development programs need to take place in the community. Such programs must be grounded in the knowledge of current conditions and characteristics of the locale. Program directors must know political networks, major issues, community strengths and weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement.

Community leadership is also experiential and action based. Local citizens learn new skills and principles that can be applied to problem-solving activities. An active community leadership development program and a strong alumni organization can provide valuable lifelong learning experiences for the participants. Such experiences will enable these individuals to become more effective as higher levels of knowledge and experience are gained.

Leadership training is necessary, but it is not a sufficient condition for improving community viability. Leadership programs are not a quick fix. They are, rather, a long-term process of improvement and change that will affect the local community. Leadership development can be integrated with community and economic development activities to build sustainable communities. This involves three components: technical knowledge, leadership ability and skills, and partnerships (coalitions) with institutional partners (Figure 1).

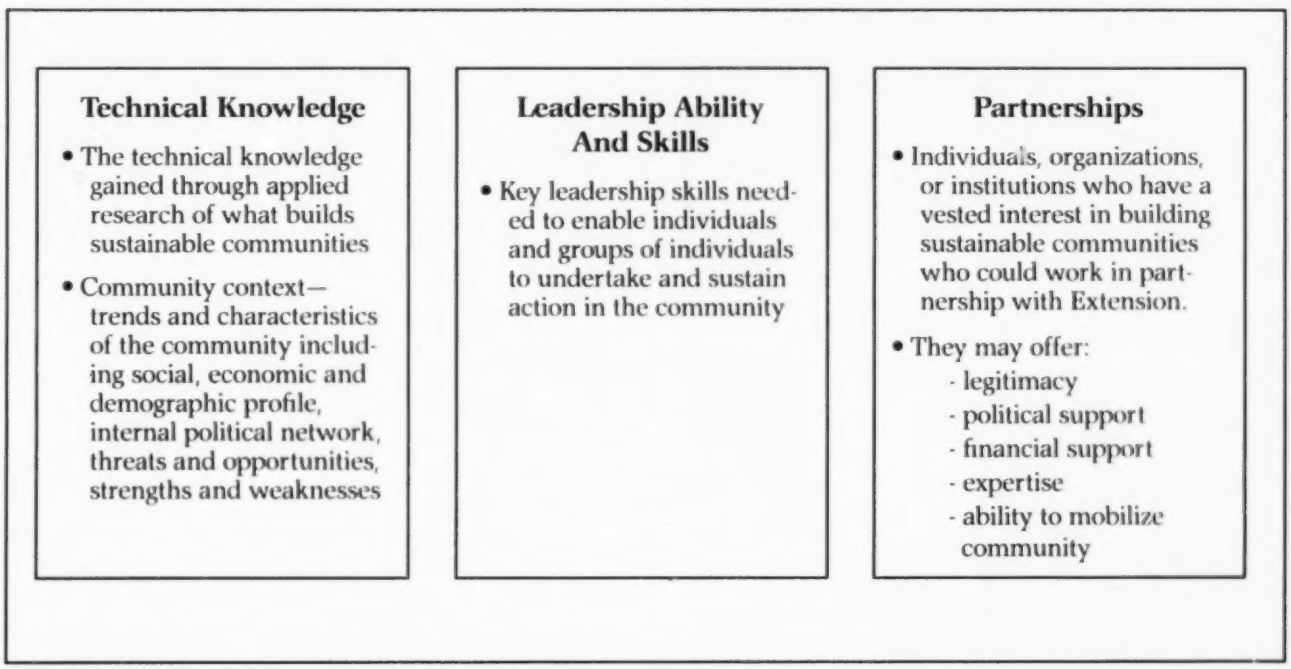
Technical Knowledge
• The technical knowledge gained through applied research of what builds sustainable communities
• Community context—trends and characteristics of the community including social, economic and demographic profile, internal political network, threats and opportunities, strengths and weaknesses
Leadership Ability And Skills
• Key leadership skills needed to enable individuals and groups of individuals to undertake and sustain action in the community
Partnerships
• Individuals, organizations, or institutions who have a vested interest in building sustainable communities who could work in partnership with Extension.
• They may offer:
- legitimacy
- political support
- financial support
- expertise
- ability to mobilize community

Figure 1. Components of an integrated community leadership development program for sustainable community development.

Figure 2. The Ayres Leadership Development Continuum, a lifelong educational process of leadership growth and development.

Technical Knowledge. This component involves knowledge gained about sustainable communities and strategies that have been successfully used for economic development. It also involves knowledge about communities: their context and characteristics, social and economic conditions, political arrangements, and the kinds of opportunities and problems facing them.

Leadership And Skills. This component is needed to enable individuals and groups to begin building sustainable development within their community. These skills can be learned. This learning process will continue far beyond the 1- or 2-year formal community leadership program. This is why active, viable community leadership alumni groups are so very important.

There are different levels of understanding and mastering skills:

- Becoming aware of leadership skills (see Figure 2).
- Understanding the basic concepts and their application.
- Integrating the skills into everyday practice.

There are also different levels of development skills and knowledge. These skills are personal, interpersonal, group or organizational, and those that involve community or economic development (Figure 2).

Institutional Partnerships. This component involves the resources contained in a broad-based coalition of organizations in the community. All of these partners must make a commitment to having a trained cadre of local leaders. They recognize their stake in enhancing sustainable development within the community. Institutional partners may include the following:

- Chambers of Commerce.
- Business and industry.
- Resource-related enterprises, such as forestry and agriculture.
- Schools and educational institutions.
- Churches.
- Government entities.
- Professional service providers.

Who is involved in this partnership will depend on the individual communities.

A note of caution must be given as we look at Figure 2 again. As communities begin to develop community leadership programs, they will find it important to remember that individuals will come in at different points on this matrix. This will be their starting point in learning or enhancing their leadership skills. Community leadership development is a very public method for a very personal journey. People need to be accepted where they

are and taken upward from that point through a lifelong learning experience.

Summary

The decade of the 1990s and the beginning of the new century will dictate that survival will rest upon the shoulders of the local community. Having a formal leadership development program will increase the likelihood that your community will be able to adapt to the changes and remain sustainable. There are no magic cures, no quick fixes. However, never underestimate the power of the local community to come together to find solutions for the common good. Having a cadre of leaders to help assist in that effort will enhance your efforts.

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This circular draws heavily on the unpublished report, "Developing Sustainable Communities With And Through Leadership Development," by an ES-USDA Leadership Design Team, of which the author was a member in 1993.

Figure 2 was developed by Janet S. Ayres, Extension Specialist, Department of Agricultural Economics, Purdue University.

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Susan R. Raftery, *Extension Community Development Specialist*

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